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UNDERGROUND

by K.A. Harbour

"I'm leaving."

The boy standing at the window lifted his head as he spoke, the fading light burnishing his white hair with rose, brushing his pale skin with pink.

He turned, his wide, almost colourless gray eyes fixing upon his brother, Julian, who sat in the room's single armchair. Elegant, cruel Julian, who hated him.

"Where will you go, Ari?" Julian asked, slyly, not bothering to look up from his book.

"Away." The boy's voice was faint as he moved from the window and dropped into a wicker chair, resting his cheek against the braided-straw back.

Julian looked at him, hating the boy's pale, bony face, like a ghost's, the thin, slight frame which housed such a strong will.

Ari was an albino. Despite his stubbornness, he was a quiet, frail boy, and completely helpless at times. And helplessness was something Julian despised.

"I have to get away from here," Ari murmured, the twilight continuing to paint his profile with soft gold.

"Then go." Julian turned a page in his book.

"I've found a place that can help me." Ari was still gazing toward the window, his face turned away. He didn't seem to care whether Julian listened to him or not.

Julian sighed and stretched to his feet. "Yeah, yeah..."

Ari fell silent, bowing his head. Julian looked at him, watching, covertly, the withdrawn look shadow his brother's child-like face.

He moved to Ari's chair and knelt beside it, grasping his knee.

"I'm sorry, Ari. What is this place?"

Ari's eyes were half-closed. "I can't tell you. Especially you."

Julian dug his fingers into Ari's knee, hurting him, and Ari gasped. Julian's lips curled.

"You won't go. You never do. Liar."

Ari bent his head again and did not look up until Julian had left the room.

Clutching the business card he'd been given at the carnival, Ari followed the weed-tangled path up to the small copse of wood. Farm fields stretched to his right. Smudging the sky before him was a glade of dark firs.

He found the cemetery, which had been one of the instructions he'd been given, and, as he passed amidst the crumbling headstones and broken, fallen angels, he lifted his head to see the church.

Even in the day, the abandoned building was an eerie sight. Its stones had turned black long ago, its Gothic arch

deteriorating, forming a crooked silhouette against the sky. The windows were shattered, the doors gone, replaced by a massive iron grating wreathed with dead ivy. Small, white things like ivory sticks gleamed within the brown foliage.

He moved up the steps and reached out a hand.

And drew it back, because the white things tangled in the ivy resembled finger bones.

Uncertain now, he peered through the grille...and choked on a hastily indrawn breath.

Beyond, in the darkness, a disembodied white hand came toward him, clasping a candle of gnarled wax.

Ari turned and ran.

And the dove his overactive imagination had mistaken for that gruesome vision flew through the grating and soared into the sky, far above the boy's fleeing figure.

"Hey." Julian's slender silhouette appeared in the parlor doorway.

Ari blinked where he sat in the huge armchair, his thin shoulders twitching when he heard the voice. In the shadows cast across his face, his eyes widened.

"Go away, Julian," he murmured.

His older brother stepped before him. In the dim lighting of the parlor, his chestnut hair glinted like wet, autumn leaves.

"It's your turn to make dinner."

"Leave me alone." Ari turned his face away and huddled deeper into the chair.

Julian smiled.

What followed was expected.

"Christ, Ari."

Lilian Montellan gently took hold of her son's chin and turned his face toward her. A massive bruise discolored the pale skin along his left cheekbone, patterning his face with blue and yellow.

"Why must you be so clumsy?" But her words were gentle as she pressed an icy compress upon the hurt.

Ari carefully removed her hand and settled back on his heels. They sat on the wooden floor of his room, the summer smells of new-mown grass and gasoline drifting in through the windows, golden light hazing the sky just above the patchwork fields.

He shrugged and moved his piece across the chessboard between them, capturing her scarlet bishop.

"It just happens." He would not tell her that his bruises and cuts were the result of anything other than clumsiness. He knew it was a stupid, twisted loyalty, but he could not tell their mother that Julian was the cause of his grief.

Lilian scowled, angry that he'd tried to conceal the bruise from her.

Julian called from downstairs, then, that her cab was here, and she sighed, checkmating Ari's queen. She leaned over and kissed his brow, reaching for her small satchel and her coat.

"I wish your father could have taken the two of you for the weekend. I hate leaving you alone." She moved to the door with Ari, her pale hair glowing in the soft lamplight. "But you'll be all right with Julian. You always are."

She kissed him again, brushing back his hair, looking at him with anxious eyes. "I don't suppose you'd like to come with me to the conference?"

"S'all right." He spoke solemnly. "We'll manage, Mom."

"Mom! C'mon!" Julian yelled and Lilian sighed again. She hurried down the hall, casting one last, troubled glance back at her youngest son before disappearing down the stairs.

Ari stepped back into his room, closing the door carefully.

Slouched in the front seat of the old Chevy, Ari kept as far away from his brother as he could get. It was getting dark already, and he felt so tired.

Julian tossed his head back and glanced at him, his chestnut hair brushing against his shoulders. The streetlights streaked his face, caused his narrowed eyes to glisten.

"So. How are you doing? What did the doctor say?" His soft, sonorous voice, deceptive, was touched with amusement.

Ari wasn't going to answer him, but Julian poked him, his eyes fixed on the road.

Ari huddled against the door with a sigh, the bruise on his cheek aching.

"The doctor said I was fine, Julian."

"Good." Julian steered the car into their drive and parked it.

But as Ari reached for the door handle, he leaned over and slammed his hand down over it. Ari flinched, steeling himself.

"Look, Ari. I'm sorry." Julian sat back. "It's just that, y'know," he sighed, "you can be a stuck-up little bastard sometimes. But I do love you. You're my little brother. Okay?"

Tears brightened Ari's eyes.

It was always this way. First the hurting, then the apologies just before their mother returned, or their father if they were staying with him. Maybe Julian really was repentant—but maybe he also knew that the apologies would make Ari feel too guilty to tell.

He didn't say anything. He slid from the car and ran to the house.

As the sun began to rise over the fields, Ari hurried up the steps of the ancient church, reaching for the latch that would open the iron grille. No morbid apparitions would stop him this time.

The grille swung inward and a figure stood there in a long, dusty overcoat, a wide-brimmed hat shadowing his features.

Ari stared at him, then, with a hand he forced to keep from shaking, he held out the business card he'd been given at the carnival.

The bizarre figure took the card, flipped it over to read it.

With a flourish, he swept off his hat, and a lanky young man stood smiling at Ari, seemingly quite ordinary at first glance. His dark hair fell into narrow, smoke-colored eyes, slanted, giving his face an exotic look that added to his mysteriousness.

He tilted his head to one side, lips curving.

"Well, then, what've you come to Tuath for?" He gazed at Ari slyly, pocketing the gold-engraved black card.

"Tuath?"

"It's what we call our place." The young man walked past Ari and closed the grille. The metallic clang it made echoed throughout the church. "So, answer my question, er—what's your name?"

"Arion Montellan, and I've come..." He hesitated, watching as the young man sauntered to stand before him again. "I've come to...to get..." He sought for the appropriate words. "Some color."

The young man's eyes glittered as he looked Ari up and down. "Ah. Yeah. I can see why. Albino, huh?"

"Yes." Ari eyed him sidelong, smiling drolly.

The young man folded his arms across his chest, shaking his head slowly.

"We only accept those with no hope of recovery in the world. No eyes, amputated limbs too tricky to replace properly, bad hearts—"

"The man at the carnival said you could help me." Ari's voice shook, but his chin was up. He would not back down.

The young man sighed. Suddenly he reached forward, pulling Ari from the bars of sunlight streaming into the church. Already, an angry redness had formed along the boy's arms and one cheekbone.

Ari touched his reddened skin, winced and cursed.

The young man swore softly, slowly meeting Ari's eyes.

"Is it always this bad?"

Ari nodded, lowering his gaze. "I need to wear winter clothing in summer, and sunglasses—even my hair dries out." Sensing he was getting through to this odd sentinel, he let his voice break in mid-sentence and added a tiny quiver for effect.

"Come with me then, Arion Montellan." The young man gently took Ari's hand and led him into the soothing darkness of the church's hallowed interior. "And, by the

by, my name's Finn."

"Finn," Ari repeated wonderingly, as he was led down a gloomy stairway. "Where are we going?"

Finn replied blithely, "To the city of dreams."

The passage ended outside, in a small, sunlit glade. As Ari watched, Finn strode to a waist-high mound of earth and lifted a carpet of moss, revealing a wooden square with a metal handle. He pulled that up. Beyond, a damp, stony staircase led ominously down into the earth.

Ari found himself following the young man through a maze of torchlit corridors. Neither of them spoke.

The last frescoed passage led to a narrow, windowless chamber lit by paper lanterns strung high along the ceiling. A tall, stained-glass window depicting a blue-robed, hollow-faced saint leaned against one wall. Candles were set behind it, and its rich red and lucid blue glow was cast upon the figure standing before it.

Ari stared. Though bronze hair cascaded down the figure's slim back, the shoulders beneath the white shirt were broad.

"Harmony," Finn stepped forward. "I've brought someone interested in joining us. This is Arion Montellan."

The bronze-haired man turned, ribbons fluttering on his sleeves, bits of bright metal shining on the dark velvet breeches he wore. Calf-high boots of dark suede gave him a cavalier look.

And the beautiful gold mask covering his face, perfectly fitted, lent him the features of a god. His hands were gloved.

"I can see why you have come." The voice which emanated from the mask was young, melodic. The creature stepped forward, taking hold of Ari's hand, holding it up, examining it as if it were a purchase he considered. The hand's white skin glowed against his glove's red velvet.

He gravely met Ari's eyes, releasing him.

"I can give you what you lack, but there is a price, Arion Montellan."

"All right," Ari whispered, his mouth dry. "What is it?"

"A year in Tuath, at my service."

Ari swallowed and glanced at Finn.

Beside Finn stood now another person, slighter, features concealed by a gargoyle half-mask of green jade. Hair dyed a metallic silver cascaded to his—or her—ankles. Garbed in a green velvet robe, the newcomer's gender was untellable.

"A year?" Ari glanced back at Harmony, suddenly frightened and very, very cold. The only things that kept him from running back home were pride and hope. "What will I do?"

"This is a city beneath the ground. We've our own gardens, a series of rooms. Do what you like. Compose music. Write poetry." Harmony shrugged, nonchalant. "Work in the gardens. Live."

"How will you do it?" Ari clenched his hands together. "Give me color?"

"You must trust me, Arion. I can give you strength."

Ari blinked as Harmony whirled away, toward the stained-glass window, stretching his arms out to either side as if revelling in the glorious colors of the jewelled glass.

Ari wasn't sure of the man's sanity, but Finn nodded, his long, boyish face somber.

"No shit, Ari. He can do it."

Ari released a pent-up breath. He wished he didn't feel so *pressured*.

"Are you a surgeon?" He tilted his head back, cynical now. "Why don't you do this in a hospital—"

"You may go back." Harmony's voice had become cold.

Back to Julian and hiding from sunlight.

Turning, Harmony saw the answer in his face. He held out one hand to the androgynous, jade-masked person, who gave him a paper and a quill pen.

Ari slowly read the quaint lettering of the contract. He understood all of it.

He signed his name with delicate precision.

Harmony took the document from him and handed it back to his secretary.

"On holidays you're free to go above. Greensleeves will show you to your room."

A young girl danced in the lamplit gallery where gargoyle and nymphs gazed down at her from a network of balconies above. The great stairway of marble sweeping down to the checkerboard floor gleamed with reflections of the dancer's movements. Her lace skirt swirled as she moved to the silent music, her dark hair whipping into her eyes, across her face.

Ari watched her from the top of the stair, one gloved hand clutching the filigreed banister. He was swathed from head to toe in black. Only his eyes were revealed.

He'd been in Tuath for half a year now. In another week, Harmony had promised, the treatments would be finished. No more strange drinks or injections which mottled and discolored his skin, bloating his limbs. It had been worse than he'd thought, in the beginning. He'd sobbed himself to sleep and kept to his richly appointed rooms for months.

Curiosity and boredom had finally drawn him out into this strange, underworld realm, where the young were wise and the old seemed youthful.

He continued to watch the dancer, who stopped suddenly and turned. One of her feet beneath the lace skirt was carved from ivory, the toes jointed and able to move like those of a marionette, connected by Harmony's mysterious art to the nerves of her leg. She was one of Finn's masterpieces. She was his lover.

Finn, Ari had learned, was an artist—a sculptor—and a genius in the mechanical sense. He could mould the most perfect limb from ivory or cast bronze, and Harmony would then perform the surgery which attached it to the

person.

"Io, Ari." The dancer moved to kneel beside him as he sat. "Worried? Don't be. Harmony knows what he's doing."

He shrugged, his shoulders hunched, hands hanging between his knees. "Nysse, why does Harmony ask a year in Tuath as his price?"

Nysse frowned down at her hands. "I don't know, Ari. But it keeps the city full. Some don't even go back up. I didn't. Finn didn't. We've been here seven years and...memories kind of fade after awhile." She shook her head and stood. "Look...I gotta go. Good luck, Ari."

He watched her move off across the checkerboard floor, leaving him a dark forlorn figure on the white staircase.

Ari's dark drapings finally came off, revealing pale skin flushed with health over taut young muscles. Blood-red hair spilled about a sculpted face with eyes of jade green and a curving mouth of seashell pink.

Ari stared at his reflection in the mirror held between two curving cats of gold. He touched his hair cautiously, pinched his arm to watch the blood rush to the mark, revelled in pure narcissism.

In a daze, he slid his clothing on and stepped into the room where Harmony waited.

"Well?" The voice beneath the mask was gentle.

Ari laughed, delighted. "It's perfect. I mean," he blushed at his own immodesty, "thank you."

Harmony's mask seemed to smile, but in the flickering light it was hard to tell. He leaned against his monstrous mahogany desk, a long cigarette in one hand, occasionally exhaling smoke like some sleek, glorious dragon. Over crimson breeches and boots, he wore a dark overcoat embroidered with red roses and golden leaves. His rather long nails were painted scarlet.

"What will you do now?" he asked, and his tone had changed. It was cooler now, no longer indulgent.

"I...don't know." Ari hadn't been doing much of anything these past six months. Sometimes he would help in the gardens, or go with the foraging parties to steal from farms and houses what Tuath needed. He'd also taken up playing the violin, taught by a russet-haired, wolfish man whose gloves hid delicate hands of jointed bronze.

"You may leave." Harmony glanced away, aloof now. "This room."

Ari turned and left the ebony chamber, feeling like a child dismissed by its parent. And he could not suppress one insistent, uneasy thought.

If Harmony could fix anything, why did he wear a mask?

Laughter, music and voices filled the chill night air, as, in the wood behind the church, Tuath's folk held Halloween revels. A bonfire had been built, its flames arcing into

the sky as dead leaves danced in and out, turning to soot, falling like black snow.

Ari watched the dancing, listened to the musicians where he sat beneath a black oak, the crisp cider he drank setting his senses ashimmer, making him forget his loneliness.

Familiar voices drew his attention to Nysse and Finn. The young man wore an overcoat the color of sapphires, his black hair tied back with a blue ribbon, his cheeks flushed apple-red from the chill. Beside him, Nysse was in snowy lace, her laughter like a young boy's.

Harmony stood beneath a maple, its bright leaves cascading around him and his three masked servants. The robed entity, Greensleeves, spoke with Willow, a woman who was lovely even wearing an ivory mask. The third member of the trio was named Jack Lantern, a slight boy who wore the ebony mask of a slant-eyed imp.

Watching them, wondering about them, Ari felt his eyelids begin to fall.

He woke to stillness, disturbed only by the popping of embers and the faint *shush* of wind-tossed leaves. The glade was deserted.

Frantic, he scrambled to his feet, running to the hidden entrance of Tuath. It would not open.

As he sank against the hill, he heard laughter from within the church.

Rising to his feet, he walked toward the Gothic silhouette and pushed open the door which led to the chapel. Stepping through a curtain of cobwebs into the nave of the church, he saw three figures standing near the main entrance. The grille had been opened all the way to let in the last, scattered bits of sunlight.

One of the intruders was Julian, his eyes and auburn hair glinting in the jewelled shadows. He was speaking softly to the youth and the girl with him, leaning against one of the stone saints.

Ari shrank back against the altar, not daring to breathe.

When Julian and his poet friends moved from the building, Ari slunk after them, watching as his brother kissed each of his companions before walking off.

He didn't know why he did it, but he followed his brother as Julian maneuvered his way through the tombstones of the churchyard, unaware of his shadow. When they reached the gates, Ari paused near the marble image of a praying child, staring at the familiar street beyond.

It had only been six months. He wasn't supposed to leave yet. But Harmony and the others seemed to have forgotten him.

And he wanted to go home. So very much.

As he neared his house, he felt the doubts begin.

What would he tell his mother? And Julian? And, as to explaining his appearance...

He sternly told himself to stop the excuses and marched up the paved walk, onto the veranda.

He reached for the door latch. The dawn light turned sea green, the sky a storm gray, while the grass and tree foliage gleamed blue. Ari's heartbeat faltered in shock, then accelerated.

Summoning up every bit of his stubborn will, he pushed open the screen door.

The hall before him was patterned with bars of shadowlight, and empty. It seemed to stretch on forever as he walked toward the parlor door, into the room beyond, even knowing what was waiting for him there.

Harmony sat in Julian's armchair. He was smoking a cigarette, as usual, clasp it between two crimson-nailed fingers. Greensleeves stood beside the chair, his eyes hollows, his mouth curving beneath his half-mask.

"Well," Harmony breathed. "Well. You broke our agreement, Arion."

As he finished speaking, Greensleeves flourished the document Ari had signed beneath Ari's nose.

"No." Ari shoved it away. "I can't go back there, Harmony. It's boring. It's *lonely*."

Harmony's hollow chuckle made Ari shiver. "A year, Arion. You agreed."

Ari snatched the document away from Greensleeves, staring at the writing, searching for a clause which would get him out of this. He let the document fall to the floor. His face was white.

"What are you?"

Harmony sat back and gestured to Greensleeves, exhaling smoke-rings. Greensleeves removed his mask.

Ari stepped back.

Greensleeves was a boy, but not a human one. His golden eyes were large and slanted, the bones of his face delicate and inhumanly perfect. His lips curved back to reveal tiny, sharp teeth. With the silver hair cascading to his ankles, he was a stunning sight.

He smiled at Ari. Seductively. Invitingly.

Ari blinked. Slowly, he looked back at Harmony. "I don't understand."

"No? We are the eldest race on this earth, boy. Have you never heard of fairies? Or elves?" The sly smile could be felt in the cruel voice. "Now, you are returning for the rest of your--"

"No! I can't! I'll go crazy!"

"You will not." Harmony stood, crushing his cigarette in the palm of one hand. "Six more months, Ari. Come. You can manage that."

"No! I'll lose my memory. I'll forget everything. I know that's how you work, Harmony."

"Arion," Harmony sighed languidly. "Do not try my patience."

"Take it back," Ari pleaded hoarsely. He couldn't believe how much he wanted to see his mother. And his dad. And his best friend, Katie. And...

His hopes faded as the ruler of Tuath shook his head. "No. That will be quite impossible." He paused, reaching

out and gently tipping up Ari's face. Tears streaked the boy's flushed cheeks. "If you do not want to return, someone must serve in your place. Someone who is missing something. Someone who needn't be willing. Just bring them to us. And, Arion, this someone will *never* return to your world. That is the price."

Ari stared at the golden mask, horrified. He could never do that. To anyone.

"You've a day to decide, then we come for you." Harmony stepped back, into the aquatic shadows. Real sunlight suddenly blazed through the windows and Ari was alone.

He sank back into the chair, despairing, and accidentally knocked a book from the armrest. He reached to pick it up. Keats. It was one of Julian's books, worn and dog-eared.

Even then he did not realize what he would eventually do.

He woke from troubled dreams, curled up in the armchair, wondering what had awakened him. The room was dark. The floorboards in the hall creaked beneath a heavy tread and he pressed back into the chair as the parlor door began to open. Harmony...

The lights came on and it was Julian who stood in the doorway, staring at him as if at a ghost.

"Arion." That was all he said as he stepped in, as if Ari had been gone a mere hour and not six months. "Why did you come back?"

Ari frowned, confused. Wasn't Julian curious about his skin color? His hair and eyes?

"I'm not sick anymore, Julian," he began cautiously. "I won't be a burden to you anymore, or Mom--"

"Mom and Dad are back together, you know." Julian leaned against the doorframe, hands in the pockets of his overcoat. His face was half-curtained by his reddish hair, giving him an eerie, eldritch look. "They're still lookin' for you. Funny. After you disappeared, they just--" he snapped his fingers. "Got together."

Ari didn't know quite what to say to that. He hunched down in the chair.

"Julian..."

Julian straightened and stalked toward him. "You know what? I thought they'd keep you forever. They promised me they would. And I went to all that trouble." Julian's easy, nonchalant tone almost caused Ari to miss the meaning of his words.

"What?" he whispered, sitting up.

"How you do think that lot found you?" Julian smiled and the malevolence in that smile went beyond any of Harmony's threats. "I met that guy at the carnival, and he told me all about these people who help cripples and freaks. I told them all about you." Julian put one booted foot on the chair and leaned toward his white-faced brother. "And they said they'd keep you forever. How did they do this?"

Ari flinched as Julian tugged on a lock of his red hair.

"You sold me to them," Ari choked out, and something broke inside of him, hardening his eyes.

"No. You weren't worth anything. I just gave you to them."

The tears in Ari's eyes were not from any kind of sorrow. His hands were white-knuckled as he clenched the chair arms. "G...gave me...to..."

"Gave you to them." Julian kicked his ankle gently with one foot. "You took everything, brat. Sick and sniveling, with Mom and Dad hanging over you at every moment. They hated you." He stepped back, smiling. "So get the hell out. Go back to your fairies."

Ari did not move when Julian left. He felt numb, dulled, as if he weren't in the real world.

Julian had once locked him in an abandoned house when Ari had been seven. When Ari was ten, Julian had held his hand onto a hotplate. He had pushed him out of a tree once, and laughed about it afterwards.

Well, now Ari knew why. It was just the way Julian was. His malice didn't have anything to do with jealous hatred. It was all part of his soulessness.

He touched the book of Keats in his lap, caressing its worn leather cover.

The parlor door opened again. It was not Julian who entered this time, but a masked figure in green robes. Ari slowly lifted his head, smiling welcome.

"I've found someone to take my place."

Ari walked to school. Alone this time.

Ever since Julian's disappearance, his parents had been watching Ari like a hawk. He felt guilty about the lie he'd given them concerning his own disappearance; that he'd run away, that sunlight had eventually given him his health and color back.

He slowed his walk as he neared school, hoping Katie and his other friends would be there early. If they weren't, Julian's gang always sought him out to torment him. As if they knew.

Katie, though, always managed to dispel the bad things, and he smiled, thinking of her dark eyes and crooked smile.

"Hey, Ari."

He stumbled back, wide-eyed with horror.

Julian stood before him, the hem of his black velvet overcoat billowing about his booted ankles. A cigarette was held in his gloved fingers and his long hair flickered about his face. He smiled and flipped up a small business card between his fingers. The card was black with gold filigree.

"Katie's got a bad heart." It was all he said. It was all he needed to say.

He turned on his heel and moved off.

Ari closed his eyes, sinking back against a telephone post. Julian hadn't gotten a soul from Harmony. He had become one of Harmony's servants.

He could warn Katie, but she would go with them anyway. His friends always did. Julian could be very convincing.

HERMES' SISTER

For Judy Woods Gorton, upon her passing her doctoral examinations

by Joe R. Christopher

Hermes, it's said in ancient tales, invented both
the lyre and later the pipes; the first he gave
to Lord Apollo, the second to Pan—they'd craved
in different ways those strings and winds, in truth
delighting in their sound. Apollo with couth
plucked then the tight intestines, the tones he wove,
resounding the scooped-out tortoise shell; a grove
Pan had then filled with pipings, in Gea's youth.

The tales had never told how Hermes' sister
the lovely Mousika, had danced and sung
unto those tunes he'd played at first, and she,
upon his gifts, with none there to assist her,
made pipes and lyre, surpassing all that blew or strung—
nor hinted tales she invented both, not he.